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ABSTRACT

To teach students the skills of editing, teachers should provide them with an opportunity to become editors--to work cooperatively in the editing of each others's writings in order to be able to accept help and to learn to edit their own writings. Purpose and audience are the two guiding lights of the editing stage. Instruction begins with demonstrations and lessons, progressing toward independent work by the individual student, with support and help from both teacher and peers. Editing is modelled as a collaborative activity in which the writer and co-editor work as a partnership with the joint aim of presenting the writer's ideas in the best possible form. The editing methods demonstrated with the whole class are next put into practice in small peer groups of four or five students. When the students are able to respond to each other's writing in a positive and constructive manner, then the writer has the benefit of audience feedback. While freeing the teacher for more effective one-to-one teaching, the technique of peer response also allows students to write more. This process approach makes use of all the human resources of the classroom in the response to writing, shifting responsibility to the students, not only to find and express their own ideas, but also to work with their peers. (HOD)

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The Bridge to Real Writing: Teaching Editing Skills

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THE BRIDGE

"No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money," claimed Dr.Johnson, the most professional of our Augustan writers, on April 5, 1776. Even allowing for some polemical exaggeration in his statement, there is a lesson here for teachers of written composition: student-writers, even during the primary stages of learning to write, are like professional writers. All writers, children as well as Dr. Johnson, need the satisfaction or reward due to the real writer: if not financial gain, then at least the knowledge that what they are writing is going to be read for the ideas it expresses.

Over the past few years many teachers at all levels have accepted the necessity of freedom from constraints during the beginning stage of writing. Whether we talk of pre-writing, zero-drafting, personal and expressive writing, pre-visions, brainstorming, private journals, U.S.S.W., or the "Writing Derby," the idea that students should be able to write in a variety of modes and to generate an exuberance of ideas accords well with our understanding of children's creativity and the building of a child's self-concept through the expression of personal experience, feelings, and values.

Bishop James Mahoney of Saskatoon said the same thing very succinctly at the Catholic Educators' Conference in Vancouver in 1980: "Human beings live to express themselves." Yet there is

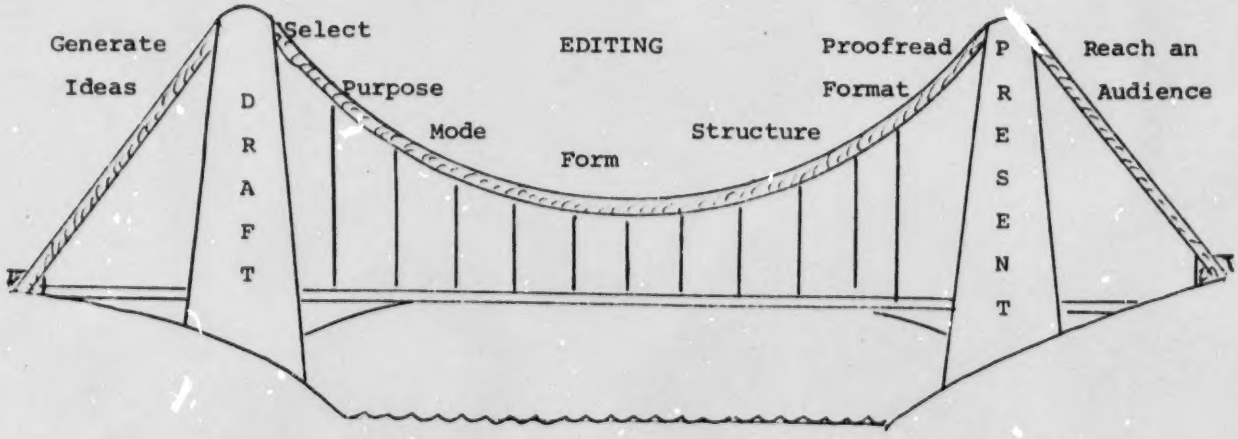
another side to this coin, and Mahoney added: "You only become conscious of your own value when people listen to you."

My concern in this paper is to show the bridge between free expressive writing, in which writers explore their ideas about themselves and their world, and writing which is to be presented to discriminating audiences. Teachers are at times dismayed and discouraged by the messiness and untidiness of students' ideas discovered in a rush of excitement, and it is true that these first efforts may have to be shielded from the less tolerant eyes of administrators and parents. Teachers may know that these shapeless scrawls are only the first drafts, but will <u>they</u> understand?

The solution may be found in "The Bridge" shown in Figure 1. English teachers, of course, are accustomed to thinking in images and symbols, and the structural outline of the suspension bridge provides a good metaphor for showing the relationship between the rough drafts of the pre-writing stage and the polished pieces to be presented to an audience.

For communication to reach across the stretch of water from the writer's shore to the audience's, it is first necessary to build the two supporting towers. The first tower on the left represents a solid foundation of drafting skills, developed over a period of time with a variety of techniques for generating and discovering ideas. Across the water on the audience's side the teacher must organize a variety of publishing outlets through

Figure 1 The Bridge to Real Writing



which the students' works can be read by a variety of real audiences, whether through oral sharing with their peers, on classroom bulletin boards, in one-off booklets, in class and school magazines, or by sending students' writings to commercial publications and writing competitions.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The image of the suspension bridge emphasises the necessity for having these pre-requisites firmly established in the writing program before attempting to teach the skills of editing. The two towers are necessary to carry the supporting tables from which the roadway is suspended. Take either of the towers away and the road will fall into the water with a resounding splash.

Or imagine trying to build the roadway across the water without having either of the towers in place. Strong supports are essential at both ends of the process in order to build the roadway to successful communication. To teach editing without the twin foundations of drafting and presentation skills becomes an exercise in futility.

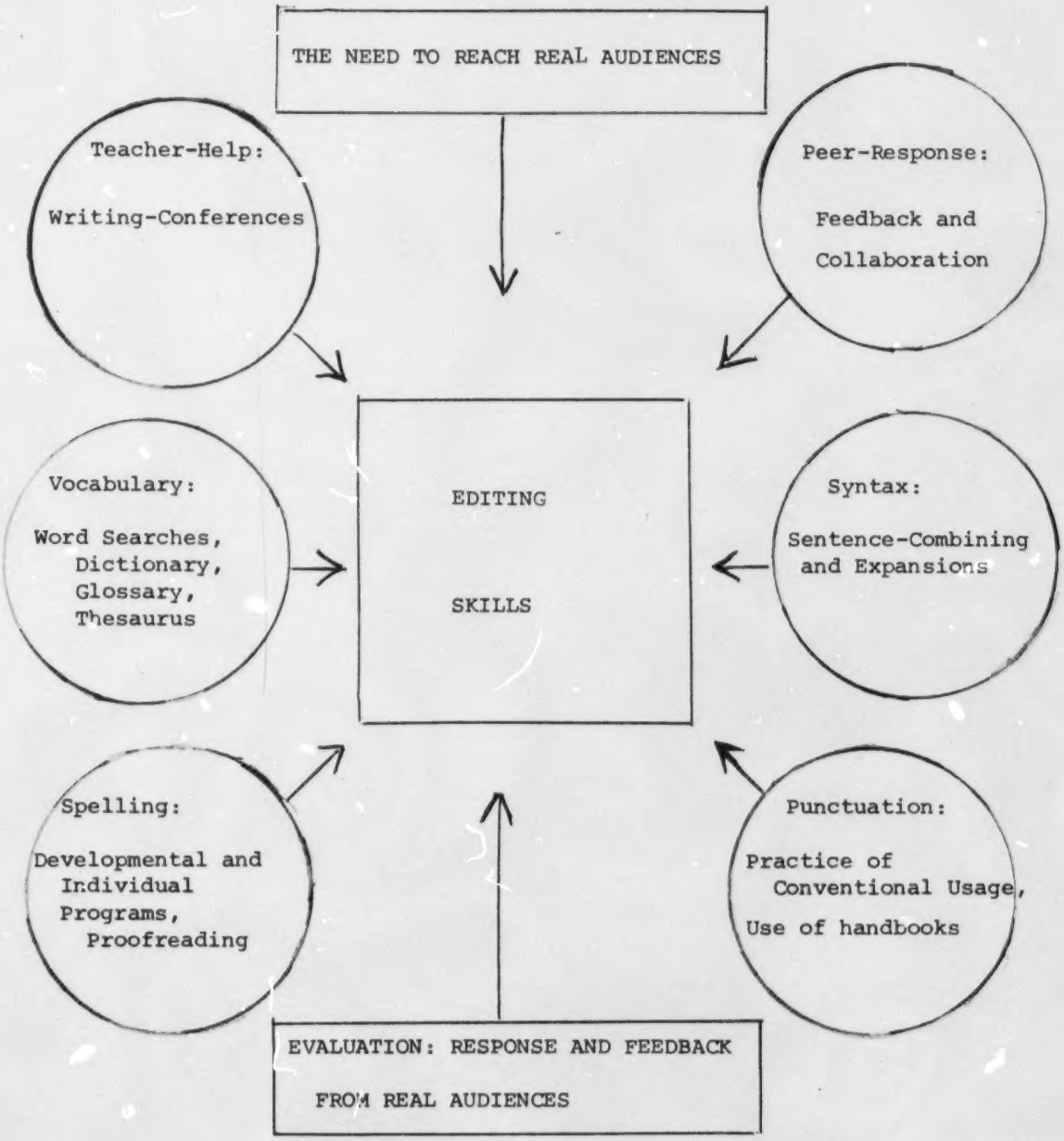
The Bridge figure illustrates the relationship between three stages of the writing process. Drafting, or pre-writing, is essentially an inward-looking activity in which the writer concentrates on discovering and expressing ideas. The main criterion for success at this stage is the quantity and variety

of ideas produced. The emphasis on this side is on creativity. There are many discussion, "talk-write," heuristic, and questioning techniques to promote this activity. Across on the other shore at the presentation stage, the focus switches from writer to audience. Here we are concerned with what the reader can understand and appreciate. Now form and format become important. The messiness, misspellings, mazes, and garbles tolerated in the first draft must be cleaned up to remove any handicap to the reader. Yet before this polishing can take place the students' writing may have to undergo a whole range of revision treatments before it is ready for presentation.

In its broadest sense editing can be taken to mean all of the decisions that are made about a piece of writing from its first conception in a rough draft through all types of shaping,changing, and expansion, to the final proof-reading of the finished copy.

In teaching the skills of editing, we are not simply drilling the students to use a formula of discrete steps, but rather giving them the opportunity to become editors--to work cooperatively in the editing of each other's writings in order to be able better to accept help, and to learn to edit their own writings. Although the aim of the editing stage of the writing process is to achieve worthy products, our teaching is based on the recognition that students learn from what they do in an activity directed towards a clearly defined purpose--the

Figure 2 The Functions of Editing



presentatiion of a specific piece of writing for a specific audience.

Purpose and audience are the two guiding lights of the editing stage, because it is a clear perception of what a piece of writing is for, and who is going to read it, that gives an impetus to the writer. Unless these is this sense of purpose in writing, then students and their co-editors cannot function in any real sense. Without purpose and audience, the editing of writing is itself a dummy run.

Because so many diverse questions about writing need to be faced, it is impossible to treat editing as a series of separate, sequential skills. Instead, the editing stage can become the focal point of a whole range of classroom activities, some of which have traditionally been treated as separate subjects within the field of English.

Insert Figure 2 about here

In Figure 2 the editing stage is viewed as the centre of effort, the application point, of various attributes of written language, including spelling, vocabulary, syntax, and punctuation. Although these particular aspects of writing may be taught as isolated skills through a series of text-book exercises, it is in the editing of writing that they can be more consciously applied to problems of composing, in whole class demonstrations, in

peer-group help sessions, and in individual one-to-one writing conferences.

To teach editing is to help the students to become independent editors. Like many other teaching situations, we begin with demonstrations and instructions, progressing towards independent work by the individual student, with support and help from both the teacher and peers. As any writer knows, editing is not a solitary task, but rather one in which the writer needs all the advice and feedback possible from other supportive readers during the evolution of the piece of writing. In this plan of action, editing skills are demonstrated by the teacher in collaboration with the class. Using anonymous samples of student writing from other years or other classes, we can ask questions to evoke responses about the value of the writing, the sort of questions a professional editor asks when considering a piece for possible publication:

What do you like about this piece?
What good ideas are there?
What good images, phrases, sentences, are there?
What is the value of this writing?

The first questions to be answered in editing are concerned with evaluation, in its purest sense; not simply as grading (or "de-grading") the writing, but aimed toward finding what value it might have for other readers. This step is essential in order to decide whether it is worth spending time on this particular piece of writing. As professional writers and editors know only too

well, not all writing is worth editing. One of the lessons to be learned from this practice is that a lot of writing has already achieved its purpose for the writer in its first draft, and there is no point in trying to take it any further. For such pieces of writing the students can be challenged to produce firm but gentle rejection slips. It is a real test of writing skill to compose a response that says, for example:

> You obviously had fun with this piece of writing, but I don't think you need to take it any furthur. Keep it in your Folio of Drafts, and you may decide to use the ideas for another piece.

But for pieces of writing that have some discernible value for other audiences, more questions can be asked:

> Who will read this?
> How can it be presented?
> In what form is it best suited?
> What ideas need to be expanded?
> What needs to be clarified?
> Are there any parts to be deleted?

The emphasis at this point is not on the identification and correction of surface errors, as in the traditional grading of essays, but rather in recognizing the potential value of the writing, and then deciding how it can be improved. Editing is modelled as a collaborative activity in which writer and co-editor work as a partnership with the joint aim of presenting the writer's ideas in their best possible form.

The editing methods demonstrated with the whole class are next put into practice in small peer-groups of four or five students, according to the techniques described by Crowhurst

(1979). Students in these groups are taught to write their comments on slips of paper which are clipped to the original. In this way a group of five students will deal with five samples of writing circulated around the group, until each piece of writing has five response slips attached to it. With dummy runs, the group can now read and compare their responses, and make suggestions as to how the original could be improved. Once trust and collaboration have been established, it will be possible for the groups to respond to each other's writing in the same way. Indeed, Crowhurst describes how students at the grade three and seven levels were able to make useful and perceptive comments on each other's writings without any prior training.

When students are able to respond to each other's writing in a positive and constructive manner (and incidentally, the written response slip is itself a piece of real writing in the transactional mode), then the writer has the benefit of audience feedback during the process of writing, while there is still time to do something about it. Of course, as with any advice, the receiver is free to accept it or not. One of the values of having several response-slips independently written is that the writer is still in control. The writer is free to pick and choose and can act on whatever advice, or consensus of opinion, seems valid.

In developing the skill of revision the students learn first the most important lesson: the first draft is not sacrosanct.

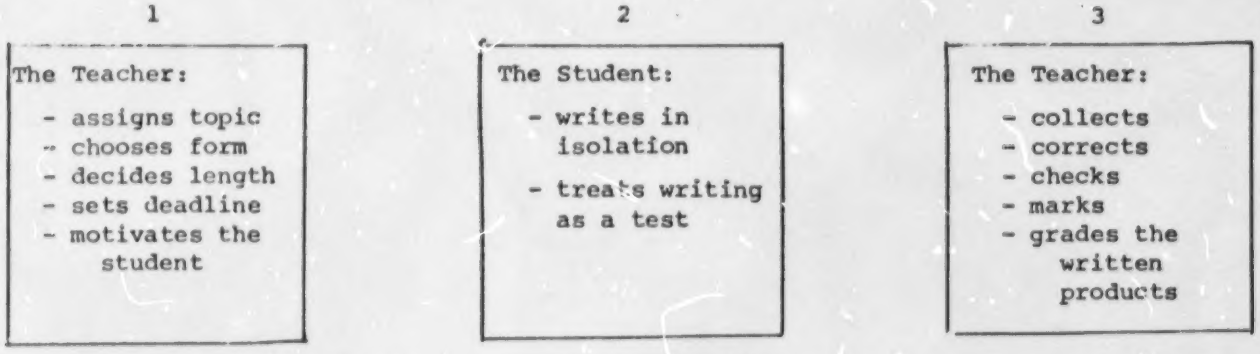
Revision is not simply a cosmetic exercise, but an opportunity to change, restructure, and amplify the ideas generated in the early drafts. Odell and Cooper (1975) describe how the students are taught to ask their own questions about the content of writing in order to add detail and texture in the development of writing style.

For the busy English teacher, the benefits of developing editing skills are tremendous. No longer is the teacher seen as the sole arbiter or judge of writing. No longer does the teacher have to mark, grade, correct, or even read, every piece of writing produced in the classroom. While freeing the teacher for more effective one-to-one teaching, the technique of peer response also allows the students to write more. How often in the past has the amount of writing in the classroom been curbed by the sheer logistic impossibility of the teacher's ability to deal with copious quantities in the traditional manner? The new approach makes use of all of the human resources of the classroom in the response to writing, shifting responsibility to the students, not only to find and express their own ideas, but also to work with their peers to present these ideas in the best possible form.

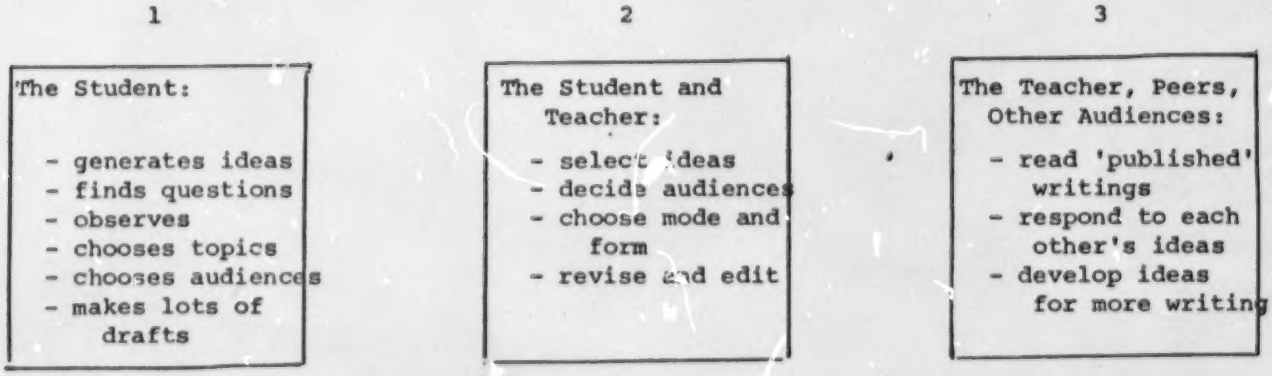
Once the method has been established and the classroom has become what Moffett (1976) describes as "the writing workshop," when students work in partnerships and small groups to read and improve each other's writing, then such a workshop period should

Figure 3 Two Approaches to the Teaching of Written Composition

Model A The Traditional Approach: Teaching the Product



Model B The Modern Approach: Teaching the Process



be built into the schedule of English classes. The workshop model for teaching written composition is perhaps the most striking difference between traditional and modern approaches. Yet the difference can also be seen in the changed role of the teacher. Instead of a program which is almost totally teacher-directed in its demand for specified products, the modern approach emphasizes writing for real audiences. The teacher must concentrate on teaching the students the necessary skills to accomplish each stage of the process.

Insert Figure 3 about here

In the traditional mode, as shown in Figure 3, the teacher accepts the responsibility for deciding on the assignment and motivating students to write in conformity to specific demands of form, length, style, and mode of presentation. During the actual writing the teacher might act as a helper, but more often, as in the examination room, as guard and foreman to keep the students at their work and to prevent copying. When the writing is complete the teacher now acts as the sole audience, becoming both judge and jury in evaluating its effectiveness, and often, in awarding a grade, is also the executioner.

If there is any one area of agreement about the traditional role of the English teacher, it is that he or she functions as the correcter of student writing, with the implication that

anything that needs correction must necessarily be wrong. So the teacher functions as a marker of errors which can be counted in the determination of a grade, in the pious but futile hope that the highlighting of errors in this week's essay will help the student to avoid other errors in next week's.

In the process approach to the teaching of composition, "Model B" in Figure 3, the teacher is viewed as the expert editor whose function is to help the writer to solve the problems of getting the best out of this particular piece of writing, or as Judy (1973) describes it, "writing for the here and now." Allowing students to work in groups frees the teacher-editor to respond to students' writing on an individual basis. Some teachers will make sign-up schedules for one-to-one writing conferences; other teachers circulate among groups to tackle any difficult problems. In either case the teacher acts as a model for the editing techniques that are being used in groups and partnerships. Luban, Matsuhashi and Reigstad (1978) have outlined how teachers might acquire and develop these skills. With the teacher accepted into the role of editor and with the flexibility made possible by the classroom in the mode of the Writers' Workshop, the actual writing conference is easily accomplished. Often, simply listening to a student read a composition aloud is sufficient to enable the student to identify awkward passages. At other times a writing problem can be solved in a consultation of a few seconds. The important point is that,

for the student-writer, expert help is at hand when it is needed during the process of writing. Help is available and immediate. Under these conditions the teacher's pointing out of a spelling error is perceived as protecting the student from the aspersions of the eventual audience rather than the punishment of the writer for making a mistake.

The result of a composition program based on an understanding of how real writers actually go about their writing will result in written products of a different order from those produced in the traditional writing class. Instead of thirty essays on the same topic, all with the required number of words and paragraphs, meeting the same deadline to qualify for a teacher's grade, we can expect a great deal more and a great deal less. On the one hand students will be writing far more first drafts about a variety of topics and in a variety of modes. Yet the number of the pieces which undergo the full editing treatment will be considerably fewer. Some students will be able to produce as many finished pieces for presentation as in a traditional class. Others may labour for weeks or months to get one piece exactly right. Graves (1979) shows us in the writing habits of seven and eight-year old children, the sense of commitment that can drive the young writer through many revisions and re-writes. Similarly Fox (1981) shows in his transcript of a series of writing conferences that no matter what the teacher might suggest, the student-writer remains in control, and the

final choice of what revisions and additions are made is still the student-writer's prerogative.

The paradox for the composition teacher is that by insisting that students emulate given models of correct writing, the teacher will receive products of lesser quality than when the teacher focuses on the students' writing skills at various stages throughout the writing process. In the latter case what the students write may not be predictable, but it is more important that the results are samples of real writing--genuine communication between writer and an audience which will probably not be the teacher. In the traditonal writing program successful students write to please the teacher-or at least to keep the teacher from nagging them. In the new model of teaching students write first to please themselves, and then to please an audience, meeting whatever criteria for success are necessary for that particular reader. For the teacher who is judged by the results of the writing program it will be of no small comfort to know that, given the proper emphasis and opportunity to use and develop their editing skills, the students will achieve finished products far superior to those of the traditional program, because their results will be, not dummy runs, but real writing.

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